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MAIN

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# Kwan-yin

BY STELLA BENSON



THE  
LITTLE  
RED  
HEART

1914

CASE  
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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

PR 603  
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MAIN

THE TEMPLE OF KWAN-YIN, GODDESS OF MERCY.

A wide altar occupies the whole of the back of the stage; a long fringe of strips of yellow brocade hangs from the ceiling to within 3 feet of the floor at either end of the altar. In the centre of the altar the seated figure of the goddess is vaguely visible in the dimness; only the the face is definitely seen — a golden face; the expression is passionless and aloof. A long table about 12 inches lower than the altar stands in front of it, right across the stage. On the table, before the feet of Kwan-yin, is her carved tablet with her name in golden characters on a red lacquer ground. In front of the tablet is a large brass bowl full of joss-sticks the smoke of which wavers in the air & occasionally obscures the face of Kwan-yin. There are several plates of waxen looking fruit & cakes on the table & two horn lanterns —these are the only light in the scene. On either side of Kwan-yin, between the table and the altar, there is a pillar with a gilded wooden dragon twisted round it, head downward. To the left, forward, is a large barrel-shaped drum slung on a carved blackwood stand.

Four priests & two acolytes are seen like shadows before this palely lit background. One acolyte to the

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right of the table beats a little hoarse bell. This he does during the course of the whole scene, in the following rhythm:—7-8-20-7-8-20. He should reach the 105th beat at the end of the second hymn to Kwan-yin. The other acolyte stands by the drum and beats it softly at irregular intervals as indicated. The acolytes are little boys in long blue coats. The four priests stand at the table with their faces toward Kwan-yin; their robes are pale dull pink silk with a length of deeper apricot pink draped about the shoulders.

The priests kneel and kow-tow to Kwan-yin.  
The acolytes sing:

The voice of pain is weak and thin  
And yet it never dies.  
Kwan-yin — Kwan-yin  
Has tears in her eyes.  
Be comforted . . . be comforted . . .  
Be comforted, my dear . . .  
Never a heart too dead  
For Kwan-yin to hear.

A pony with a ragged skin  
Falls beneath a load ;  
Kwan-yin — Kwan-yin



Runs down the road.  
A comforter . . . a comforter . . . .  
A comforter shall come . . . .  
No pain too mean for her;  
No grief too dumb.

Man's deserts and man's sin  
She shall not discover.  
Kwan-yin—Kwan-yin—  
Is the world's lover.  
Ah, thief of pain . . . thou thief of pain . . . .  
Thou thief of pain, come in.  
Never a cry in vain,  
Kwan-yin—Kwan-yin . . . .

**First priest—tenor—chants:**

Is she then a warrior against sin?  
On what field does she plant her banner?  
Bears she a sword?

**First and second priests—tenor and bass—chant:**

The world is very full of battle;  
The speared and plumed forests in their ranks  
besiege the mountains;  
The flooded fields like scimitars lie between  
the breasts of the mountains.

The mists ride on bugling winds down the  
mountains.

Shall not Kwan-yin bear a sword?

**Third priest—tenor—chants:**

Kwan-yin is no warrior.

Kwan-yin bears no sword.

Even against sin

Kwan-yin has no battle.

This is her banner—a new day, a forgetting  
hour.

Her hands are empty of weapons and out-  
stretched to the world.

Her feet are set on lotus flowers,

The lotus flowers are set on a pale lake,

And the lake is filled with the tears of the world.

Kwan-yin is still, she is very still, she listens  
always,

Kwan-yin lives remembering tears.

**At this point the smoke of the joss-sticks veils the  
face of Kwan-yin. A woman's voice sings:**

Wherefore remember tears?

Shall tears be dried by remembrance?

This voice is apparently not heard by the priests and acolytes.

First and third priests chant:

Ah, Kwan-yin, mother of love,  
Remember  
Those in pain,  
Those who are held fast in pain of their own  
or another's seeking.  
Those for whom the world is too difficult  
And too beautiful to bear,

All:

Kwan-yin, remember, remember.

First and third priests:

Those who are blind, who shall never read the  
writing upon the fierce rivers.  
Who shall never see the slow flowing of the  
stars from mountain to mountain.  
Those who are deaf, whom music and the  
fellowship of words have forsaken

All:

Kwan-yin, remember, remember.

First and third priests:

Those whose love is buried and broken;  
All those under the sun who lack the thing  
that they love  
And under the moon cry out because of their  
lack,

All:

Kwan-yin, remember.

First priest:

Oh thou taker away of pain,  
Thou taker away of tears. . . .

The smoke quivers across Kwan-yin's face again, and  
the same woman's voice sings:

Wherefore remember the desolate?  
Is there a road of escape out of the unending  
wilderness?  
Can Kwan-yin find a way where there is no  
way?

Still the voice is unheard by the worshippers. First  
priest sings, and while he sings the acolyte beats the  
drum softly at quick irregular intervals.

Kwan-yin shall come, shall come,  
Surely she shall come,  
To bring content and a new diamond day to  
the desolate,  
To bring the touch of hands & the song of birds  
To those who walk terribly alone.  
To part the russet earth and the fingers of the  
leaves in the spring  
That they may give up their treasure.  
To those who faint for lack of such treasure  
To listen to the long complaining of the old  
and the unwanted.  
To bring lover to lover across the world,  
Thrusting the stars aside and cleaving the seas  
and the mountains.  
To hold up the high paths beneath the feet of  
travellers.  
To keep the persuading roar of waters from the  
ears of the broken-hearted.  
To bring a smile to the narrow lips of death,  
To make beautiful the eyes of death.

A woman's voice again sings, unheeded, from behind the veil of smoke.

Wherefore plead with death?

Who shall soften the terrible heart of death?

All, in urgent but slow unison:

Kwan-yin.

Kwan-yin.

Kwan-yin.

Kwan-yin.

The golden face of Kwan-yin above the altar changes suddenly and terribly, and becomes like a masque of fear. The lanterns flare spasmodically. The voice can now be identified as Kwan-yin's, but still the priests stand unhearing with their heads bowed, and still the passionless bell rings.

Kwan-yin, in a screaming voice:

Ah, be still, be still . . . .

I am Kwan-yin.

I am Mercy.

Mercy is defeated.

Mercy who battled not, is defeated.

She is a captive bound to the chariot of pain.

Sorrow has set his foot upon her neck.

Sin has mocked her.

Turn away thine eyes from Mercy,

From poor Mercy.

Woo her no more.  
Cry upon her no more.

There is an abrupt moment of silence as the light  
becomes dim again & Kwan-yin's face is frozen still.  
Then the first priest sings.

What then are Mercy's gifts? The rose-red slopes  
Of hills . . . the secret twisted hands of trees?  
Shall not the moon & the stars redeem lost hopes?  
What fairer gifts shall Mercy bring than these?

For, in the end, when our beseeching clamor  
Dies with our bells; when fear devours our words;  
Lo, she shall come & hold the night with glamor,  
Lo, she shall come & sow the dawn with birds.

Ah thou irrelevant saviour, ah thou bringer  
Of treasure from the empty sky, ah thou  
Who answerest death with song, shall such a singer  
Be silent now? Shall thou be silent now?

The 105th beat of the bell is now reached and there  
is a pause in the ringing.

All:

KWAN-YIN.

The bell is rung slowly three times. Then there is absolute silence. There is now a tenseness in the attitudes of all the worshippers, they lean forward and look with suspense into Kwan-yin's quite impassive golden face.

The lights go out suddenly.

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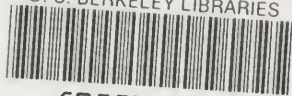


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